Review Articles

If We Think Globally, Should We Write Local, National, or Imperial History?

James Sidbury
Department of History, Rice University
Houston TX 77005-1827, U.S.A.
Js58@rice.edu


War, Empire and Slavery, 1770-1830. RICHARD BESSEL, NICHOLAS GUYATT & JANE RENDALL (eds.) Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xv + 299 pp. (Cloth US$ 85.00)

* 

Questions of definition and scale are coming to claim equal prominence with questions about inclusion and exclusion in discussions of the period of widespread political and social change that was once unproblematically referred to as the “Age of Democratic Revolutions.” The essays in these two anthologies address both sets of questions. Almost all ask who different cultures or polities included or excluded and how they explained the exclusions. They also address the question of scale. On the one hand, they move beyond the Atlantic basin—the traditional site of studies of the Age of Revolution—to consider how we should conceptualize the relationships among the different regions throughout the globe that were influenced by European expansion during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, various essays ask this broad question of...
places of different size. Some balance careful attention to the specifics of local histories with a global perspective, while others work on a national, imperial, or continental scale. If none of the essays solves the riddle of how to strike this balance—it’s not, in truth, a riddle amenable to an ultimate solution—they exemplify, especially when read together, the different analytical trade-offs inherent in various approaches to the problem.

Robert Palmer famously chronicled the waves of political upheaval that led to the independence of the United States, the creation of the French Republic and then Empire, and the Spanish American wars of independence in a way that inadvertently called attention to questions about who was included and who excluded from the new nations that emerged in that era. Many came to see his failure to discuss the Haitian Revolution in his opus (1969) as indicative of a blind spot for the racial (and by extension other) exclusions that marred the democratic revolutions he championed. Could that problem be remedied by incorporating the Haitian story into the broader narrative? This question helped stimulate the remarkable outpouring of scholarship on revolutionary Saint Domingue and Haiti over the last thirty years (including Julius S. Scott III’s influential dissertation [1986] and important books by Joan Dayan [1995], Laurent Dubois [2004, 2012], John Garrigus [2006], David Geggus [1982, 2002], Stewart King [2001], Jeremy Popkin [2010], and others). The increasing prominence of Haiti in the histories of the Age of Revolution has both reflected and contributed to the established consensus in “mainstream” scholarship on the centrality of the history of the Caribbean to the burgeoning field of Atlantic History. Some historians insist that including Haiti, while necessary, cannot substitute for a more fundamental interrogation of Palmer’s optimistic description of the revolutions as “democratic.”

All of this work has contributed to a consensus about the importance of Caribbean slavery to Atlantic History that has taken hold as a growing chorus of historians has questioned the coherence of Atlantic History as a field of study. One of the strongest challenges to the Atlantic paradigm has come from scholars who point out that Atlantic societies cannot be separated from the rest of the world, that just as the Atlantic connects to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, so Atlantic societies interacted with peoples beyond the basin. They argue that we should study World History rather than Atlantic World History, because studying the Atlantic basin without adequate attention to the ties between Atlantic societies and the rest of